Recovering Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt

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"I will go as—Myself, I think!" Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt (August 11, 1836 – December 22, 1919) assigns the speaker of her poem "The Fancy Ball" this arresting concluding assertion. Unlike Piatt's contemporary Emily Dickinson, whose speaker-proxy insisted that "I'm Nobody!"[1] Piatt's female counterpart foregrounds her presence and her agency. Fortunately for Piatt's contemporaneous reputation, her readers didn't understand the writer's audacity or her irony. Unfortunately for her posthumous reputation, neither did their immediate successors. But fortuitously for today's audience, Piatt's challenging poetry has reemerged from that obscurity, challenging us to reexamine outdated assessments and to establish new theoretical paradigms for reading not just Piatt's work but also other nineteenth-century poetry, especially poetry by women.

As scholarly interest in Piatt's work grows, the current moment seems auspicious to understand what researchers have learned and to envision what avenues future work might most productively pursue. To that end, this essay addresses two foundational tasks: section one synthesizes current biographical scholarship, integrating that scholarship with touchstone Piatt poems, while section two, which describes Bennett's recovery of Piatt from oblivion (and is written principally in Bennett's voice), suggests the obstacles researchers face when they reintroduce a lost writer with a complicated and misunderstood oeuvre. This section also outlines reasons for optimism and the substantial opportunities that are opening for further, more accurate research.

I. "Too much dark in my heart": Piatt's Artful Life

Why must we recount Piatt's life-history? Among the important nineteenth-century American writers recovered during the last several decades, Piatt, like many of her contemporaries, has suffered from erroneous and incomplete biographical studies. Providing an accurate account that combines recent scholarship into a more comprehensive overview will help researchers better understand this complex writer's complex poetry.

Piatt was born in 1836 on her maternal grandmother's plantation outside Lexington Kentucky. In a career that spanned seven decades (1854-1911), she published close to 600 poems.[2] Although widely circulated in their own day, her poems went out of favor early in the twentieth century, as did those of virtually all nineteenth-century American women poets excepting Dickinson.[3] The Library of America's 1993 publication of "Giving Back the Flower" in *American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century* ushered in renewed interest in her writing. Since then, two selected editions of her poetry have been published, one by Larry R. Michaels (1999), the other by Paula Bernat Bennett (2001); and numerous anthologies now contain generous samplings, including William C. Spengemann and Jessica F. Roberts's *Nineteenth-Century American Poetry* (1996); Karen L. Kilcup's *Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers* (1997); Paul Lauter's *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2 (1998); Axelrod et al.'s *The New Anthology of American Poetry*, Vol. 1 (2003); Lisa Maria Hogeland et al.'s *The Aunt Lute Anthology of U.S. Women Writers* (2004); and, most recently, Elizabeth Renker's *Poems: A Concise Anthology* (2016).

Family History

Sarah Morgan Bryan was the eldest of three children born to Talbot (sometimes Talbott) Nelson Bryan (1809/10-1860?) and Mary Ann(e) Spiers (d. 1844).[4] Talbot Bryan himself was the son of Maxemilly Simpson (1762-?) and Morgan Bryan, III (1750 or 1757?-1815 or 1819?), who in turn was the son of Morgan Bryan, Jr. (1729-1804?).[5] Morgan Bryan, Jr.'s sister Rebecca married Daniel Boone (1734–1820) in 1758. Morgan, together with his brothers, James and William, accompanied the Boones when they left North Carolina and crossed the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky in 1773. In 1775-1776,[6] the Bryan brothers established Bryan Station, a fortified settlement near Lexington, Kentucky[7] that is best known today for having successfully repelled a British-led assault by 300 Indians in August 1782.[8] Large families both, the Bryans and the Boones intermarried over the generations, giving Sarah ties to the famous frontiersman several times over, a fact that both she and her husband exploited in their poetry, albeit for very different reasons. (Succinctly, John James Piatt, or J. J., as he was known, depicts Boone as a hero, while Sarah depicts him as a killer.) Sarah Piatt's mother came from slaveholding families, the Spiers and the Simpsons.[9] We know little of Mary Ann(e) other than that she died prematurely in 1844, probably of childbirth, since this fate was common among Southern women of her class and period.[10] Mary Ann(e) Bryan's death was the first of a series of losses from which Piatt never fully recovered, and some of her most powerful poetry dwells on the legacy of bitterness and skepticism that shadowed her life thereafter.

Childhood and Education

Following their mother's death, Piatt and her younger sibling Ellen were sent to live on their maternal grandmother's plantation, a dislocation that undoubtedly exacerbated the child's

bereavement.[11] Piatt's poetry depicts Mrs. Spiers as a rigid and unfeeling woman who was obsessed with religion and had little time for an active young child. Left to her own devices, Piatt played with the plantation's slave children and looked to the adult slaves both for comfort and discipline. In one of Piatt's most discussed works, "A Child's Party," the poet provides a vivid child's-eye picture of her life on this plantation and of the intricate distinctions in power and place that governed its inhabitants.

Piatt's residence on the plantation ended with her grandmother's death (c.185?), after which Sarah made a brief and unsuccessful stay with her father and his new wife, Sophia Stone, on the latter's plantation in Versailles, Kentucky.[12] When this arrangement broke down, Sarah was settled with her father's sister, Aunt "Annie" Boone, in New Castle, Kentucky, for what Piatt describes in the poem "Aunt Annie" as "the fairest" of her childhood days.[13] (In a letter to Louise Chandler Moulton, Piatt vents her hatred for stepmothers, and it seems likely that as a child she saw her father's remarriage as yet one more loss.[14]) Through all these removals, Piatt was accompanied by her nurse, an elderly enslaved woman whom Piatt inherited from her mother.[15] Although never explicitly named, this woman appears in numerous poems, including "A Child's Party" and "Over in Kentucky" (1872), and suggests she played a crucial role in the poet's life, both as a tie to her lost mother and as a surrogate mother in her own right. In "The Black Princess" (1872), Piatt mourns her nurse's death in a poem that is as sincere as it is inevitably appropriative and self-serving.

Education

While living with Aunt Annie, Piatt attended Henry Female College in New Castle, graduating in 1855. Under the leadership of Charles Sumner's cousin, the Rev. S. S. Sumner, the college's

four-year curriculum covered a wide range of subjects, from geography, United States history, algebra, and parsing in Milton and Young, to astronomy, chemistry, logic, political economy, and intellectual and moral philosophy.[16] In striking contrast to Northern female seminaries such as Mount Holyoke, where Dickinson was educated, Henry Female College did not focus on training young women to become missionaries, although the school did offer to teach children who were so inclined free of charge. Instead, like most Southern private schools for women, Henry saw its primary mission as providing a broad-based humanistic education designed to make them better wives and mothers to slaveholding men.

Aside from John Milton and Edward Young, the college catalogue—a copy of which now resides in the collection of Paula Bennett's research materials in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library at Ohio State—does not specify what other poets, if any, the students studied.[17] However, other evidence, including most importantly epigraphs that Piatt attached to many of her early poems, suggest that both during this period and immediately afterwards, she was also reading Poe and the major British Romantics: Edward Bulwer-Lytton, John Keats, Sir Walter Scott, Thomas Moore, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron, perhaps the period's most widely condemned—and most widely read—poet, and the one whom Piatt, like so many other young women, surreptitiously idolized.[18]

Even if Henry's curriculum did not include Piatt's favorite poets, however, the school did do something almost as important: it rewarded students' poetic talent. Indeed, budding poet that she was, Sarah was twice asked to write verses for her school's graduation ceremonies, first for her own graduation in 1855, and then three years later, for the class of 1858. By then Piatt had become a practicing poet with thirty-four poems in the *Louisville Journal,* edited by George Prentice, a mentor to Piatt and many other emerging poets, as well as another twenty-one in the

New York Ledger. And it may well have seemed to both mentor and pupil that the goal Prentice had set for her—to become the United States's premier woman poet—was not beyond her reach, the more so since the *Ledger*, unlike the *Journal*, was a periodical that enjoyed a national audience and boasted a stable of writers that included some of the country's best known literary luminaries, including E.D.E.N. Southworth, Henry Ward Beecher, John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, William Cullen Bryant, Alfred Tennyson, and Charles Dickens.

Marriage and Family

On June 18, 1861, two months after Fort Sumter's fall, Sarah Bryan—at age 25, unusually late for a young Southern woman of Piatt's class—tied the knot with John James Piatt in Aunt Annie's house in New Castle.[19] Prentice had hired the Ohio-born young man as his confidential secretary in 1857, largely on the strength of his poetry,[20] and Jean Allen Hanawalt suggests that Prentice may have actively fostered the relationship between the two young people, both of whom he greatly admired and was eager to advance.[21] Other factors besides poetry may have counted in Sarah's own marital calculations, however. Among the most important were her lack of a dowry, which in the South made her virtually unmarriageable—the principal subject of "A Dirge by the Sea" (1860)—and her response to a war she found abhorrent, the focus of "If Freedom's Miracle Should Fail" (1861). For insight into Sarah's state of mind prior to her marriage, however, the two most telling poems are "To-Night" and "Moonrises," both of which Prentice bundled together under the misleading title "Two sweet little poems" (March 12, 1861). The first, published a few months before the couple wed, concludes "there is nothing in the earth or skies, / Nothing that I can love to-night," while the second derides her husband-to-be in terms

she would use to describe him through the remainder of his life, speaking of his "pretty fears" and obliquely touching on his self-admiration. Interestingly both these two poems are also written in the pared-down style that she would permanently adopt after the publication of *Nests at Washington and Other Poems* (1864), coauthored with her husband.

After the wedding, the couple moved to Washington, D. C., where J. J., as he styled himself, had secured a position as a Treasury Department clerk.[22] It was the first of several low-grade, ill-paying patronage positions he held during his lifetime.[23] While in Washington, J. J. cultivated relationships with numerous important figures in the Northeast literary establishment, including Edmund Clarence Stedman, Richard Stoddard, Bayard Taylor, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Walt Whitman, and James Russell Lowell.[24] His most notable and longest-lasting literary relationship, however, was with William Dean Howells, who, like J. J., had Ohio roots. The two co-published their first poetry volume, *Poems of Two Friends*, in 1860, and reviewers drubbed them severely for their efforts. But where Howells got the point and began writing prose fiction, where he proved to have considerable talent, J. J. never lost his desire to win fame as a poet, his ineptness notwithstanding.[25]

In 1862 Sarah and J. J.'s first child, a daughter, Marian, was born. Their first son, Victor, arrived two years later. Donn, Frederick, Guy, Louis, and Cecil followed, their births occurring at two-to-three-year intervals.[26] Aside from these multiple births, nothing especially notable seems to have occurred during the war years, or at least this is how J. J. chose to present their new life. Indeed, in "Charity at Home," (1862), he explicitly contrasts his happy lot with that of the soldiers bivouacked nearby, with what can only be called sublime narcissism celebrating his new domestic life as a "closed Fairyland," where "warm within, from our sweet rooms we gaze / Into the dark, and see — our Fireside." Torn between two warring sides, with kin in both,

Sarah's view is stunningly different and unequivocally double-voiced. Not only does she place her married speakers outside and relatively close to the battlefield, but she depicts them as "tal[king] of coldness and pallor, / And of things with blinded eyes," making the horror of the soldiers' deaths the poem's focus.

Piatt concludes with a surprise move, as the wife gives her husband a spray of jessamine-flower, saying, "I shall never know/ How the hearts in the land are breaking, / My dearest, unless you go." Does the wife see her gesture as an act of patriotic sacrifice, as one reviewer said of the poem? Or is she bitterly commenting on the war's folly and the pain it will cause? Or, finally, is Piatt suggesting the very different ways she and her husband approach the war, contrasting her husband's aesthetic approach in poems like "Charity at Home," with her own far more dour and bitter one? Whatever her intention, such ambiguities marked "Hearing the Battle" as just the kind of poem some of Piatt's contemporaries found "wayward, abrupt, [and] enigmatic," and with which they never were entirely comfortable.[27] Like "Hearing the Battle" capable of being read in contradictory ways, such poems gave her writing a density and complexity of meaning that, like Dickinson's, is subtly modern precisely because it is so difficult and hence so nuanced. Not coincidentally, such writing also enabled J. J. to read his wife's poetry without understanding it at all.

This obtuseness was crucial to J. J.'s conjugal bliss. In what Hanawalt calls "a good portrait of the Piatts at home,"[28] Katharine Tynan offers reminiscences of the couple while they lived in Ireland, indicating particularly the symbiosis that helps explain why, for all their differences, they stayed together. If Tynan viewed J. J. as much the inferior poet — for her, Sarah was the one with "a real poetic gift"[29] — J. J. was nevertheless deeply committed to his wife's career, over which he took complete charge. Not only did he carefully collect her poems

from the odd places she left them,[30] but he was indefatigable in marketing them to the premier periodicals and publishing houses that increasingly rejected his own work.[31] (*The Atlantic Monthly,* for example, published thirty of Sarah's poems to seven of J. J.'s.[32]) For her part, Sarah ceded lordship over the family to her husband and suppressed in her everyday interactions with him those more multifaceted qualities that his sentimental vision of her could not have sustained, among them, not just any hint of what she was actually doing in her writing, but her sense of humor and her interest in beautiful young men.[33] For both spouses, it was a workable agreement. She got to write the kinds of poems she wanted to write, and he saw himself as playing a vital role in securing the family's welfare. Had J. J. not turned out to be as bad a breadwinner as he was a poet, they could have managed.

In 1867, John lost his Treasury Department position, and the couple moved back to the Ohio area, where they built a house 300 feet above the Ohio River in North Bend, outside Cincinnati.[34] Reluctantly, John went back to newspaper work[35] while he searched long distance for a new patronage position, establishing a pattern that would persist throughout most of his life.[36] Until he was awarded a consulship in Cork, Ireland (1882-1893), none of the appointments he garnered lasted more than a few years, and the erratic nature of his government service,[37] combined with the multiple trips back and forth between Washington, DC and Ohio, with or without wife and children, led to increasingly serious financial difficulties for him and his family.[38]

Irish "Exile" (1882 – 1894)

In April 1882, President Chester Arthur appointed J. J. the United States Consul to Cork, Ireland. That June the family left from New York City for their new home. [39] J. J. had sought a consular

post as early as the Lincoln administration, not without reason for hope.[40] During the nineteenth century, the government regularly awarded such foreign service positions to artists and writers, and James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and William Dean Howells were all recipients of this governmental largesse.[41] J. J. hoped that getting a consular appointment would relieve his family's growing debt.[42] As the point of departure for ships headed to the United States,[43] Cork was an important commercial position; however, consulship did not pay well.[44] According to Bernadette Whelan, who has written most extensively on the Piatts' "exile,"[45] in 1881 J. J. had applied for the consulship at Frankfort-on-the-Main, where the salary ranged from $3000 to $5000.[46] At a $2000 salary,[47] the Cork posting was inadequate for the family's needs. Whelan describes J. J.'s correspondence home as "littered with complaints about the costs of living in Ireland and the want of money."[48] Already overburdened with debt, the family continued to sink deeper into its financial hole.[49]

In other respects, however, the Cork consulship worked well for J. J. and Sarah both.[50] For one thing, it gave the family a prolonged period of stability.[51] For another, it involved work for which J. J. appears to have been particularly well suited, or at least so the petitions twice signed by the "citizens"[52] of Cork when his job was under threat would seem to suggest.[53] J. J. and Sarah had arrived in Ireland during a period of intense political turmoil[54] on which, as consul, J. J. was tasked by the State Department to report.[55] In these reports, he wrote supportively of the Irish and their struggle for political autonomy, and sought to humanize the Irish immigrants to the US whom other consuls in Ireland denigrated. [56] Along with completing paperwork, J. J. and his family were also expected to play the role of representative Americans,[57] host American dignitaries on their way to and from Europe,[58] and entertain Irish and British dignitaries in their home,[59] all of which the couple seem to have done well.

As poets, Sarah and John were welcomed into the circle of Irish and British writers around Katharine Tynan.[60] Tynan's positive omnibus review of Sarah's poetry in *The Irish Monthly* in 1886[61] won her a visit to "The Priory," the grey stone mansion the Piatts rented for much of their Cork stay,[62] and she and Sarah became fast friends thereafter.[63] Through Tynan, the Piatts met Father Matthew Russell, S. J., editor of the *Irish Monthly*, Aubrey de Vere, W. B. Yeats, and the Sigersons, a Republican family of poets and intellectuals into which their son, Donn, would marry.[64] Like Tynan, Yeats wrote a very positive review of Sarah's poetry,[65] as did another friend of Tynan's, Alice Meynell, whom the Piatts visited in London.[66] Mary McCartin Wearn pays special attention to Meynell's review, which she claims seeks to reinterpret the "feminine," so often applied to Sarah's poetry, "not as a grace, but as a force. . . . An energy standing sufficiently alone.'"[67]

In March 1893, after much lobbying,[68] J. J. was transferred to the consulship in Dublin where, according to Whelan, he hoped to supplement his salary with "unofficial income."[69] The financial relief, if there was any, proved short-lived. A change in administrations in Washington, DC that same March led to J. J.'s replacement four months later over not just his own appeals, but those of supporters in Cork, Dublin, and the United States.[70] Were it not for the family's financial problems and the loss of their second-youngest child, Louis, in a boating accident in Cork harbor in 1884, their stay in Ireland was positive overall. Sarah, especially, developed a deep feeling for the Irish people. Indeed, of the 110 poems that she published between 1883 and 1899, only twenty-four do not pertain one way or another to her experience in Ireland or her travels through Europe, travels colored throughout by her experience in Ireland. It is not simply, as Whelan puts it, that Sarah's and J. J.'s poems "take on Irish tones,"[71] but that Sarah's, in particular, evince a deep identification with the Irish people, whose lives seem to have evoked

for her memories of her Southern childhood with all its complicated questions of class and caste. As Pamela Kincheloe observes, these poems stand apart not only from the typical travel poems that other Americans abroad in Europe penned, but also, in many cases, from the poetry of Irish writers, which tamps down the suffering of the Irish peasantry and emphasizes aesthetics.[72]

In no hurry to go home, the family stayed in the London area into 1894, living at Tynan's Ealing House.[73] When they returned to the United States that autumn, they did so reluctantly.[74] Behind they left three sons: Louis, who drowned while trying to sail a boat of his own making,[75] Arthur Donn, who followed in his father's footsteps, holding down a vice-consul position in Dublin until his premature death in 1914,[76] and Frederick, who, also in his father's footsteps, was a vice-consul in Edinburgh, where he died in 1918, like his brother never having been promoted to the consulship itself, probably because he preferred stability to the endless revolving door of consulship.[77]

Final Years (1895 – 1919)

Immediately after their return, J. J. and Sarah settled in Washington, where J. J. resumed his hunt for patronage positions[78] and Sarah, by her own account, went back to "wailing, wailing, wailing."[79] The search was not particularly successful,[80] and sometime around 1898, he and Sarah returned to North Bend. [81] Failing to find a government position in Cincinnati, J. J. once again looked to the newspapers for work even while he struggled to keep his and Sarah's publishing careers afloat.[82] Aside from two self-financed projects, neither of which he had the money to sustain—the annual *Hesperian Tree* (1900, 1903), and the periodical startup, *Midland Monthly* (1907-08)—publishing opportunities also largely dried up, leaving the couple with

essentially no income.[83] In 1902, Howells wrote his friend, John Hay, that he had heard that J. J. was now "quite pathetically poor."[84]

In 1914, J. J. was severely injured in a carriage accident, and he died in 1917 without ever regaining his faculties.[85] In 1918, the same year that her daughter Marian died,[86] Sarah capitulated to her youngest son, Cecil's, urgings and moved East to live full-time with him and his family in Caldwell, New Jersey, abandoning her "hill-top cottage" for good.[87] On December 22, 1919, Sarah died there of old age, and her body was returned to Ohio to rest next to Marian's in Spring Grove cemetery in North Bend.[88] Only in the late twentieth century would her passing, and her substantial nineteenth-century presence, receive renewed attention.

II. "That shining world of art": Piatt's Future and Resources for Researchers

"(It will make them stare and shrink, / It will look so strange at a Fancy Ball,)" avers the narrator, as "The Fancy Ball" ends by asserting her unadorned self-presentation.[89] We should note that Piatt places this assertion in parentheses, as if whispering to her present and future readers that she understands the risks of independence and even self-exposure. It has taken us a long time to comprehend her difficulties, both personal and professional; and her example, if it offers an optimistic outcome, certainly presents a cautionary tale, as the account that follows demonstrates.

Rescuing a long-lost poet from oblivion might seem a straightforward affair, but it is not. Take Emily Dickinson, for example. When Dickinson died in 1886, she left behind materials for (arguably) 1789 poems, some carefully sewn into hand-made packets or "fascicles," others written on miscellaneous loose sheets, including paper scraps of all kinds, and still others sent as

letters to family or friends. Nor is this scattering of her writings the only problem. Far from it. Most importantly, because she herself never put her poems into print, there is no way to stabilize the texts. Even among the fascicle poems one finds works that are unfinished or that sport alternative variants in punctuation and/or wording so significant that some view them as separate poems. Because of such practices and others like them, more than a century after the poet's death, scholars continue to argue over what constitutes a Dickinson poem, and the debate over the number of poems she actually wrote, no less than her intentions in creating them, is unlikely to end anytime soon—if ever. As I (Bennett) learned when dealing with the (lost) poetry of Sarah Piatt—which at least has the limiting virtue of being in print—even in less problematic cases, recuperating a long-dead poet is rarely simple; and doing so can never be one person's project alone. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a community of writers, scholars, and lay readers to bring forth such a poet. Piatt's "recovery" is a case in point.

My first two attempts to introduce Sarah Piatt to the world were abject failures. I had assumed that readers' ignorance of her would be an advantage. After all, how often does a gifted poet from another era emerge out of the blue? Far from being enthused by Piatt, however, the outside readers who were the first to pass judgment on her work found my claims for her exaggerated, even absurd. One, a Kentuckian, who produced a three-page screed against her and me for the University Press of Kentucky, mocked everything about her except what he snidely referred to as her "fine Kentucky pedigree," referencing her familial connections to Daniel Boone. My second attempt to restore Piatt to visibility—in an article submitted to *American Literature*—was no more successful, although, to give credit where credit is due, the author who wrote the rejecting review was significantly more professional. The year was 1993, and I waited two more years before trying again. One result of these efforts was clear: I had to find better way

to introduce her, one that did not rely solely either on her poetry or on my word as to how talented she was.

In 1991, I had given two papers in which I had discussed Piatt among a group of other nineteenth-century American women poets. One was on American periodical literature in the nineteenth century and the other was on the interrogation of domestic ideology in nineteenth-century American women's verse. Both had been well-received and, following the debacle in 1993, I decided to develop them for publication, which occurred in 1995. It was a salutary lesson on the importance of what I here call *community scholarship*. In my first attempts to get Piatt published I had presented her in isolation, modeling her on Dickinson as a writer *sui generis*. But this claim was at best only partially true. Yes, Piatt's tough, knotty style and her consistent use of dialogue and irony to deconstruct her century's addiction to sentimental verse set her apart from most nineteenth-century poets (male as well as female). But in other respects, in particular her use of rhyme and skeptical approach to domesticity, she was one with her peers, many of whom, as I had come to believe, were also poets worthy of study. Inviting readers to think of Piatt (and Dickinson, for that matter) as members of a literary cohort that lived and wrote in a specific cultural period made all these writers more legible and gave them greater interest for today's scholars. The fact is that no poet, even the greatest, can be read in isolation without distortion, no more than he or she can be read apart from the culture on which she draws. As scholarly texts that divide American poetry into "periods" make patently clear, writing poetry is a collaborative affair, and in any given period major and minor figures alike regularly use basic thematic and stylistic features. Where rescuing poets is concerned, focusing only on a poet's exceptionality not only places a huge burden on the scholar to prove his or her assertions, but it fundamentally misrepresents how poetry as an art develops.

If Piatt was no isolato, neither, as it turned out, was she totally without admirers in the 1990s, which for me personally was the most startling discovery. When I first found her in or around 1990, I believed that I had discovered her. Understandably so. Her last book, *Child's-World Ballads and Other Poems*, had come out in 1895 and her last poem – the exquisite "A Daffodil" – was published in 1911, when she was seventy-five. Thereafter, there was only silence, and I assumed that like so many other nineteenth-century American women writers she had been erased by the advent of modernism in the twentieth century's first decade. Nor was my assumption that far from the mark. Going in search of information on her I found almost nothing. Twentieth-century encyclopedists wrote brief squibs uniformly categorizing her as a minor woman poet who wrote pleasing lyrics on marriage and children and nothing else.

Literary scholars hardly did better. For all her recognition that Piatt was in some ways an outlier among nineteenth-century American poets, Emily Stipes Watts, in her groundbreaking *The Poetry of American Women from 1532 to 1843* (1978), limited herself to a few brief comments on Piatt's poems on children. The only lengthy treatment of Piatt, Jean Allen Hanawalt's biocritical dissertation on Piatt and her husband (1981), is still useful, but her conviction that Piatt, like her husband, was never more than a minor poet compromises the way in which Hanawalt presents the poems themselves. Scholars such as Cheryl Walker and Joanne Dobson, both of whom were committed to revaluating women's sentimental poetry, did not write on Piatt at all, possibly because they did not hear the irony in her verse, and therefore, like the encyclopedists and Hanawalt, apparently chalked her up as just one more minor writer.

Because there seemed to be no other scholars writing on Piatt, I took a proprietary interest. She was *my* discovery. Or so I thought. The truth turned out to be much more complicated: in 1996, William C. Spengemann and Jessica F. Roberts published fourteen Piatt

poems in their Penguin edition of *Nineteenth-century American Poetry,* the first significant publication of Piatt's poems since Emerson Venable's oft-reprinted anthology, *Poets of Ohio*, in 1909. Spengemann was a scholar; Roberts was an undergraduate student who was putting together an edition of Piatt's American poetry as her honors thesis at Dartmouth. In 1997, Karen L. Kilcup included fourteen Piatt poems in her anthology on nineteenth-century American women writers, and Janet Gray, who had yet to complete her dissertation, included three poems in her anthology, *She Wields a Pen*. The following year I published my anthology of American women poets, which included twenty-four Piatt poems. In 1999, Lucy Frank, a British graduate student at Warwick University, asked if I was doing a selected edition of Piatt, and when I said I was, she shifted her subject to a critical study of Piatt's poetry. In the same year Larry R. Michaels, a Lutheran pastor and independent scholar, published the first selected edition of Piatt's poetry since 1886. My selected edition, *Palace-Burner*, came out in 2001.

What's staggering about this list is that all the scholars but one (Kilcup) were working independently both of me and one another, even as all were contributing in diverse ways to Piatt's reclamation. Given how close in time their contributions were, I had no proprietary rights at all. Call it zeitgeist or what you will, Piatt's moment had come, making her legible to readers in ways she had never been before. In bringing Piatt forward as they did, these anthologists were tacitly acknowledging that fact.

Whatever else, this piling up of anthologies dedicated to or containing poems by Piatt pointed to a significant shift in literary values by a diverse range of readers, young and old, male and female, scholars and lay readers, all drawn in by the poetry and excited to explore this new writer. Even more thoroughly lost than Dickinson, Piatt—whose writings on the Civil War and gender issues were key components of her oeuvre—had suddenly become relevant to a new

breed of readers trained to read difficult texts and committed to the same kinds of social concerns as she had been. When in 2003, Professor Elizabeth Renker invited me to store a duplicate copy of all of my research papers on Piatt in The Ohio State University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, I jumped at the chance.[90] As mentioned above, I had first sent my proposal for a book of Sarah Piatt's poetry to the University Press of Kentucky in 1993, in hopes that, if nothing else, the press would be excited to have a book of such high quality poetry by a native daughter. I imagined the kinds of events it could stage to draw lay readers in to read her works, many of which reference not just Kentucky but the Civil War and its impact on her native state. But Renker's offer made me realize that Ohio was an equally appropriate venue—maybe even more so, since Piatt and her husband made North Bend, Ohio, their home for most of their married lives. But the decision to go with OSU has turned out to be far more advantageous than I could have imagined.

The array of Piatt resources at OSU has grown exponentially since I first gave the library my research papers and now comprises the single most significant Piatt repository in the world. Along with my research files, which contain, among other things, transcriptions or copies of the bulk of Sarah Piatt's known letters in part or whole, Ohio State is now the repository for Michaels's collection of book and periodical first printings of Piatt's work as well as for two digital projects that make or will make important Piatt archives available to scholars and the public around the world.[91] The first digitization, which went live in 2016, makes freely available on a public site every issue of the important and rare Washington, DC Reconstruction-era newspaper *The Capital* published from 12 March 1871 through 22 Feb. 1880. During this period, Piatt's cousin-by-marriage Donn Piatt was managing editor, and he published sixty-seven

of Sarah's poems.[92] Some are among the strongest and frankest poems that she wrote on political issues connected to the Civil War and its aftermath.

The second important project digitizes Piatt's poetry published in *The New York Ledger* when she was still Sarah Morgan (Sallie) Bryan. This substantial body of early poems is not currently available in any edition of Piatt's work. This project will also make available on a free, public site images of the poems, the full pages of *The Ledger* on which the poems appeared, and transcriptions of each. (The estimated date the site will go live is 2019, that is, in time for the centennial of her death.) If the poems in *The Capital* speak to Piatt's experience both during the Civil War and in the Reconstruction period, the poems in the *Ledger*, like those in the *Louisville Journal*, which Renker hopes to digitize at a future date, shed invaluable light on the poet's early years and on the evolution of her poetics.[93]

Many individuals are contributing to move Piatt studies into the next phase. The Piatt Castles in West Liberty, Ohio, stages an annual salon on Sarah's work. (Just the kind of affair I dreamed Piatt would someday have when I first sent my proposal out to the University Press of Kentucky!) Michaels's generous donations of his Piatt library and other poetic works contemporary to Piatt's provide incredible primary-source resources for students and scholars. The amazing professionals in OSU's Rare Books and Manuscripts Library facilitated the handling of the materials in my research papers, both in copying my papers and in the digitization process. Without the collaborative efforts of all the people I have named in this introduction, and the many I have not named, none of this substantial recovery would be possible. But with the resources already collected here, the projects in progress, and the endeavors still planned, the important enterprise of reclaiming this great American poet continues to advance.

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As we look to the future, Dickinson's history again appears useful. Hard though it may be to believe now, Dickinson was not always the revered canonical figure she is today. On the contrary, it was only in the 1980s, when works by female academics began flooding the market, that feminist readings of Dickinson's texts not only outnumbered critiques by men but raised the poet's stature, as researchers found more and more things to say about this notoriously elusive poet. Indeed, due to the work done by these scholars, academic output on the poet rose from 540 lifetime hits in the MLA international bibliography in 1974 to 1425 by 1990. Today the figure stands at 3274, a number that puts Dickinson in the same league as Whitman and Melville as our most important writers. And the impact of this scholarly activity, now carried out much more equally by men and women, is evident everywhere. Not only has Dickinson become America's first canonical woman writer, but with canonization has come a slew of perquisites: a named society that meets yearly and organizes Dickinson conferences here and abroad, variorums, reception studies, concordances, websites, and on and on, from tee-shirts bearing her image to the complete reclamation of the "Homestead," where she spent most of her life, down to her conservatory and gardens. Sarah Piatt's future, whether or not it is equally bright, seems at least equally assured.

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Notes

[1] Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt, "The Fancy Ball," in *A Woman's Poems* (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1871), 1. Emily Dickinson, "I'm nobody—who are you?" Emily Dickinson Archive, http://www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/74871.

[2] Paula Bernat Bennett, "Introduction," *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), xviv.

[3] Larry R. Michaels, *That New World: The Selected Poems of Sarah Piatt (1861-1911)* (West Liberty and Toledo, OH: Mac-A-Cheek Foundation for the Humanities and Bihl House), 1999, 21; Jean Allen Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study of John James and Sarah Morgan (Bryan) Piatt" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 1981), 10; Paula Bernat Bennett, "Introduction," *Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998), xxxiv.

[4] "'Family Group Record' for Morgan Bryan III and Maxemilly Simpson," handwritten notes by Bruce Elliott King IV, Box 2, Folder 7, Paula Bennett Research Materials for "Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt," SPEC.RARE.CMS.0116, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University; Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 95; Bruce King, "Re: Morgan Bryan #3 Grandson of Morgan, Sr.," genealogy.com, posted 20 Feb. 2003, http:genforum.genealogy.com/bryan/messages/6446.html; Mrs. John A. Logan, *The Part Taken by Women in American History* (Wilmington, DE: The Perry-Nalle Publishing Co., 1912), 840. King spells the name of Piatt's mother both with and without the final "e" on "Anne."

[5] Bruce King, "Georgia (Wright) Spiers Bible," genealogy.com, posted 8 April 2003, http://www.genealogy.com/forum/surnames/topics/spiers/119/; "'Family Group Record' for

Morgan Bryan III and Maxemilly Simpson," handwritten notes by Bruce Elliott King IV, Box 2, Folder 7, Paula Bennett Research Materials for "Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt," SPEC.RARE.CMS.0116, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University; Emerson Venable, *Poets of Ohio* (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, 1909), 183.

[6] [Ella Farman,] "Mr. J. J. Piatt and Mrs. S. M. B. Piatt," in *Poets' Homes. Pen and Pencil Sketches of American Poets and Their Homes*, by R[ichard]. H[enry]. Stoddard and Others (Boston: D. Lothrop, 1877), 63-64.

[7] George Washington Ranck, *The Story of Bryan's Station, as Told in the Historical Address Delivered at Bryan's Station, Fayette County, Kentucky, August 18, 1896* (Lexington, KY: Transylvania Print Co., 1896), 6-7.

[8] Bennett H[enderson] Young, *History of the Battle of Blue Licks* (Louisville, KY: John P. Morton, 1897), Archive.org, 16-7.

[9] Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, xxiii; Paula Bernat Bennett, *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry, 1800-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 140; "'Family Group Record' for Morgan Bryan III and Maxemilly Simpson," handwritten notes by Bruce Elliott King, IV, Box 2, Folder 7, Paula Bennett Research Materials for "Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt," SPEC.RARE.CMS.0116, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University; Bryan Giemza, *Irish Catholic Writers and the Invention of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), 277. See also King, "Georgia (Wright) Spiers Bible"; Hanawalt, 94-95; [Farman], 67.

[10] Logan, *The Part Taken by Women in American History*, 840.

[11] Paula Bernat Bennett, "John James Piatt (1835-1917), Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt (1836-1919)," in *Encyclopedia of American Poetry: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Eric L.

Haralson (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), 328; Hanawalt, 95; Bruce King, "Re: Morgan Bryan #3 Grandson of Morgan, Sr."

[12] King, "Re: Morgan Bryan #3 Grandson of Morgan, Sr."; FamilySearch, s.v. "Talbott N. Bryan," www.familysearch.org.

[13] Sarah Morgan Bryan Piatt, "Aunt Annie," *Mrs. Piatt's Select Poems: A Voyage to the Fortunate Isles and Other* Poems (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886), 24. See also [Farman], "Mr. J. J. Piatt and Mrs. S. M. B. Piatt," 64; Michaels, *That New World*, 219.

[14] Sarah Piatt to Louise Chandler Moulton, 7 January [1890], quoted in Bennett, *Palace-Burner*, li note 1.

[15] [Farman,] "Mr. J. J. Piatt and Mrs. S. M. B. Piatt," 64.

[16] *Fourth Annual Catalogue of the Henry Female College New Castle Kentucky for the Year Ending June, 1854,* Kentucky Historical Society, Digital Collections, http://www.kyhistory.com/cdm/compoundobject/collection/RB/id/526/rec/1.

[17] Annual announcement and catalogue for Henry Female College, New Castle, KY, 1859, Box 3, Folder 1, "Guide to the Paula Bennett Research Materials for *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*, circa 1990s-2014," https://library.osu.edu/finding-aids/ead/RARE/SPEC.RARE.CMS.0116.xml.

[18] We base our assessment of her reading on internal evidence in the poems, a rich topic for future researchers. She paid homage to Poe in "A Legend of the Mammoth Cave," *New York Ledger* 16 (May 26, 1860): 2. On Piatt's love for Byron's poetry, see Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 101-2.

[19] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 108.

[20] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 73; Clare Dowler, "John James Piatt," "John James Piatt, Representative Figure of a Momentous Period," *The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* 45 (1936): 7.

[21] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 108, 74.

[22] Dowler, 9-10.

[23] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 2, 152-53; Michaels, *That New World*, 12.

[24] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 113-19, 123-28.

[25] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 75-80.

[26] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 163, 111, 116; Michaels, *That New World*, 11.

[27] Review of *Dramatic Persons and Moods, with Other New Poems*, in "Recent Poetry by Women," *Scribner's Monthly* 19 (February 1880): 635.

[28] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 234.

[29] Katharine Tynan, *Memories* (London: E. Nash and Grayson, 1924), 179, 192.

[30] Katharine Tynan, "Poets in Exile: Mr. and Mrs. Piatt at Queenstown," *The Critic: A Weekly Review of Literature and the Arts* 21, no. 627 (February 24, 1894): VIIIa.

[31] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 129, 188.

[32] Bennett, "Introduction," *Palace-Burner*, xxvii, liv, note 16.

[33] Tynan, *Memories*, 183-85, 186-87.

[34] Dowler, "John James Piatt," 11-12.

[35] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 166, 167; Dowler, "John James Piatt," 13.

[36] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 153, 166.

[37] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 175.

[38] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 175, 220-5; Michaels, *That New World*, 11-12.

[39] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 235; Bernadette Whelan, "Poets in Exile: The Piatts in Queenstown Consulate, 1882-93," *New Hibernia Review* 17.1 (2013): 83, Project Muse.

[40] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 235.

[41] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 83; Amanda Claybaugh, "The Consular Service and US Literature: Nathaniel Hawthorne Abroad," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 284-85.

[42] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 91-92.

[43] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 84.

[44] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 92.

[45] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 95.

[46] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 83.

[47] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 92-93.

[48] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 93.

[49] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 93.

[50] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 234.

[51] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 256.

[52] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 257.

[53] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 256-57.

[54] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 84.

[55] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 83.

[56] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 84.

[57] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 236; Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 86-87.

[58] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 87.

[59] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 235-36.

[60] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 91.

[61] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 91.

[62] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 235.

[63] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 91.

[64] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 241-43.

[65] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 243.

[66] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 243.

[67] Mary McCartin Wearn, *Negotiating Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 106.

[68] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 95.

[69] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 93.

[70] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 94.

[71] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 91.

[72] Pamela Jean Kincheloe, "Through the Claude Glass: Nineteenth-Century American Writers and Monumental Discourse," diss., Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, 1997, for example, 98-100.

[73] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 95; Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 258.

[74] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 95.

[75] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 238-39.

[76] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 95-96.

[77] "John James Piatt," *New York Times*, January 24, 1896: 3, *The New York Times with Index,* ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

[78] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 234, 261.

[79] Whelan, "Poets in Exile," 95.

[80] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 261.

[81] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 261.

[82] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 265.

[83] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 262-70.

[84] Bennett, Introduction, *Palace-Burner*, xxvii.

[85] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 269.

[86] Spring Grove Cemetery records, s.v. "Piatt," www.springgrove.org/geneology-listing.aspx. Marian is listed incorrectly in the main digital record as "Marion," but the link shows the correct name, Marian P. Piatt.

[87] Hanawalt, "A Biographical and Critical Study," 261.

[88] Spring Grove Cemetery records, s.v. "Piatt," www.springgrove.org/geneology-listing.aspx.

[89] Piatt, "The Fancy Ball," 2.

[90] "Guide to the Paula Bennett Research Materials for *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*, circa 1990s-2014," SPEC.RARE.CMS.0116, Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University.

[91] The finding aid for the Larry Michaels Papers, "Guide to the Larry R. Michaels Biographical Research Notes on Sarah Piatt, circa late 1800s, 1984-circa 2000s," SPEC.RARE.0222, is available at: https://library.osu.edu/finding-aids/ead/RARE/SPEC.RARE.0222.xml. The books and serials Michaels has donated to Ohio State to date (donations that are ongoing) may be located through a keyword search in the Ohio State University Libraries' catalog for "gift of Larry R. Michaels." Or, see http://library.ohio-state.edu/search/X?SEARCH=gift+of+Larry+R.+Michaels&searchscope=7&SORT=D

[92] This digital archive of *The Capital* is available at: http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/OSUCapital/default.aspx#panel=home. On the number of poems Piatt published in individual periodicals, see "Finding List for Sarah Piatt poetry: 1864-1917, circa 1990s," Box 1, Folder 8, "Guide to the Paula Bennett Research Materials for *Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt*, circa 1990s-2014," SPEC.RARE.CMS.0116**,** Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Ohio State University. https://library.osu.edu/finding-aids/ead/RARE/SPEC.RARE.CMS.0116.xml.

[93] Renker reports a major discovery by S. E. Andres in 2018 of nine previously unknown publications by Sallie M. Bryan—eight poems and one sketch—published in 1857 and 1858 in the Louisville, Kentucky, *Christian Repository and Family Visitant: A Monthly Journal Devoted to Baptist Literature,* edited by S. H. Ford and Mrs. S. R. Ford. Andres is a marketing professional and writer working on public history projects in the Cincinnati, Ohio area. Renker,

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"Sarah Piatt's Realism in 1870s Print Culture," *ESQ: A Journal of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture* 64, no. 2 (2019): 153n1.